

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Women Emancipation by means of

Writing: Virginia Woolf's

A Room of One's Own

Alumna: Ana Marcos Losa

Tutor: Román Álvarez Rodríguez

Salamanca, 2020

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

June 2020

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Abstract

This essay bears upon the academic limitation of women originated by a traditional society in which education is correlated with class and gender prospects. Society, education and money have distanced woman from intellectual ambitions; thus, the analysis of Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* guides this study through the participation of women in literature by considering socio-economic and academic levels. After that, the figure of Judith Shakespeare is introduced metaphorically encompassing the difficulty of women to follow typically masculine itineraries. The last section concentrates on a little comparison between Virginia Woolf and Louisa May Alcott's writings by means of her novel *Little Women*.

Key Words

Women, fiction, Virginia Woolf, society, education, money, the Victorian era, the Elizabethan era, *Little Women*.

Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado aborda la limitación académica de las mujeres que parte de una sociedad tradicional en la que la educación se relaciona con las expectativas asociadas a cada género. La sociedad, la educación y el dinero han distanciado a la mujer de la ambición intelectual; de este modo, el análisis de la obra de Virginia Woolf *Un cuarto propio* guía este estudio a través de la participación de la mujer en la literatura teniendo en cuenta los niveles socioeconómicos y académicos. Después, se muestra la figura de Judith Shakespeare que metafóricamente abarca la dificultad de las mujeres para seguir itinerarios que son típicamente considerados masculinos. En la última parte se adjunta un breve comentario sobre *Mujercitas* que permite la comparación entre las obras de su autora Louisa May Alcott y Virginia Woolf.

Palabras clave

Mujeres, ficción, Virginia Woolf, sociedad, educación, dinero, la época victoriana, la época isabelina, *Mujercitas*.

“Life can only be understood backwards;

but it must be lived forwards.”

– Søren Kierkegaard

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1. Introduction

Women's figure has been commonly stereotyped and set by society. Throughout history, their social standing have been clearly differenced from men's status. It has been widely reported how women have been excluded from public life and confined at home. There have always been female collectives who fought for women's rights and tried to change their fixed socio-economic role. Historically, these protests were strengthened during the Victorian era, which covers Queen Victoria I's reign (from 1837 to 1901). During these years, the United Kingdom gradually became an industrialized country and, in the middle of the period, married women gained the right to divorce and to be worthy of possess property after marriage, including the right to fight for children's custody. Notably, most women became aware of the precariousness of being born female, so that many of them grouped together politically. The First World War (28 July 1914 - 11 November 1918) served in favour of some women who were required to assume men's posts; in 1918 the law allowed them to be elected into Parliament. In addition, the notable shortage of healthy men after the war finally promoted the right to vote to over 21-year-old women in 1928, entailing a big step towards equality between sexes. This nineteenth and twentieth centuries' portrayal of the United Kingdom exhibits the timeless circumstance surrounding women. In the course of these events at the end of the Victorian age, the Londoner writer Adeline Virginia Stephen (25 January 1882 – 28 March 1941) and her three siblings were brought up in a typical middle-class Victorian family led by Leslie Stephen —a prestigious literary figure and editor— and Julia Jackson, who also influenced her artistically. Virginia Woolf was always surrounded by writers, artists and philosophers who belonged to the Bloomsbury group (1907-1930) with whom she discussed diverse socio-cultural questions. Her husband Leonard Woolf participated in their meetings as well. Virginia Woolf's writings and thoughts being essential to study

the female figure, this paper is focused on her essay *A Room of One's Own*, which is a firm reference to present womanhood together with education and society. I manage the present study towards the educational limitation of women and how it has been influenced by society for a long time. Both education and society together, with other elements which will be explained onward, have set for them a distant itinerary from working as writers. Virginia Woolf notes at the beginning of the essay *A Room of One's Own* (1928) that she is “asked to speak about women and fiction” (1) in order to read it to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtaa at Girton in 1928. In this line, the author reviews some works written along history with the intention of analysing the participation of women in society and in academic areas. Woolf’s writing style might be considered Modernist, being not only the stream of consciousness a distinctive characteristic of her novels, but also the use of hybrid genres by mixing realism and fiction in one piece.

2. Analysis of *A Room of One's Own*

The origin of *A Room of One's Own* occurs when the writer, Virginia Woolf, is demanded to make a speech about *women and fiction* in front of an audience of academics from the Arts Society at Newnham College for women and the literary society Odtaa at Girton in 1928. This work is composed of two long papers which develop a detailed study primarily around the concepts of women and fiction. At the beginning of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf acknowledges the difficulty of the assignment but she —following her independent and conscious style— interprets the subject matter from a unique perspective. She points out that women and fiction are intrinsically related to *room* and *money*. The statement “All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point —a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (2) is

crucial to understand one of the main points of this study. She might want to show that both terms, women and fiction, are not possible to combine yet considering that the main question is about the woman and a suitable own room. In terms of writing fiction, owning a room is principally related to money and then to social classes. Once the author introduces these questions, she changes the style from facts to fiction because “it is likely to contain more truth” (2) and the succeeding passages focus on Mary Beton’s¹ narration along Oxbridge². The writer even notes her intention of combining facts and fiction: “Fiction must stick to facts and the truer the facts the better the fiction — so we are told” (17). Drawing from the premise that “ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction” (7), women’s literary resources are reduced to their own private libraries. The issue resides in the poverty of their sex that is directly in contact with society and its classes, education, and money and space.

2.1. Society

Society might have been commonly distinguished into upper, middle and working class. These social classes are mostly defined in function of money and privileges. Eventually, class conflicts have arisen due to socio-economic rivalries among social classes. There is also a social differentiation between genders owing to patriarchy. Thereby, the conflict about precariousness of the female sex might be accurately related to class conflict. This conflict appears in a patriarchal society where women are under

¹ Mary Beton could represent a real sixteenth century Scottish lady since she is presented in the anonymous ballad “Mary Hamilton” or “The Fower Maries”.

² *Oxbridge* is the linguistic blend of *Oxford* and *Cambridge*. This term encompasses the oldest, prestigious and elitist universities in the United Kingdom.

men's control. Power is related to privilege and here men have plenty of it in contrast to women. As a result, they hold a secondary position and some discrepancies about what each sex can achieve emerge. In this way, society's conventions have excluded women from participating in public life, limiting them and nearly devoicing them. Immediately the female gender becomes unknown and many writers wish to analyse it, as Mary Beton notes: "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?" (30) The use of the word "animal" denotes the male desire of exploring the wild side of the female condition as if they were totally placed in a distant place. In fact, reading some extracts of essays from quite renowned authors reinforces the idea that the female figure is practically remote and exotic. Diverse opinions are created around this sex although "wise men never think the same thing about women" (34); for instance, Pope expresses that "Most women have no character at all" (34) and opposite to him is La Bruyère conveying that "Les femmes sont extremes; ells sont meilleures ou pires que les hommes" (34); some ancient cultures divinize them and others accuse them of witchcraft. In spite of the countless illustrative works Mary Beton could attach to prove the anonymity of women in society, she portrays the ordinary character of Professor von X who should serve to characterize all the angry men who write books about women from "the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth" (38). In line with this, Virginia Woolf shows that

England is under the rule of patriarchy. Nobody in their sense could fail to detect the dominance of the professor [Professor von x]. His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the Judge. ... With the exception of the fog he

seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry. When I read what he wrote about women I thought, not of what he was saying, but of himself. (39-40)

The vehicle of this exasperation is that they are only concerned with their own superiority and they do not accept to lose their own privileges and thus, power.

2.2. Education

Regarding the education system, social class and gender are extremely important conditions to receive proper instruction. Men's teachings encompassed distinct disciplines that allow them to execute an artistic career meanwhile women's education was oriented towards the formation of housekeepers, as Emily Davies proclaimed:

When, for instance, Mr Maurice tells us that 'the end of education itself is, as it has always been considered, to form a nation of living, orderly men,' the definition will be accepted, with the tacit reservation that it applies only to men, in the exclusive sense of the word, and has nothing to do with the education of women. (Davies, *The Higher Education of Women* 8)

Besides, their education correlated with class prospects. Accordingly, middle and upper classes mistresses could afford lessons of music, Classics, and manners although these lessons had the purpose of instructing willing wives. On the contrary, not many working class young girls had the opportunity of learning to read and write. In general, women were not persuaded with intellectual ambition because it was considered to distance them from their pertinent duties at home until 1918 when schooling for boys and girls eventually became compulsory prior to fourteenth years old. However, Virginia Woolf confirms that "A poor child in England has little more hope than had the son of an Athenian slave to be emancipated into that intellectual freedom of which great writings are born." (131). In this way, few girls received instruction, education being essential to

achieve women's emancipation because it provides them a voice to express their ideas and to demonstrate their artistic potential. Another question is their precarious facilities which were reflected in Lady Stephen's work³: "Considering how easy it is to raise immense sums for boys' schools. But considering how few people really wish women to be educated" (23). In addition, various male authors wrote their opinions about women and consequently society's view of them were highly influenced:

There was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually. Even if her father did not read out loud these opinions, any girl could read them for herself; and the reading, even in the nineteenth century, must have lowered her vitality, and told profoundly upon her work. There would always have been that assertion — you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that. (65)

Thus, these misogynistic stances contribute to perpetuate detrimental differences between sexes and outdated roles of inferiority and superiority what is caused by intending to balance their weak self-esteems and to maintain their privileges.

2.3. Money and space

With respect to the opportunities for women to accomplish an artistic career, money and space occupy a determining position beyond education. *A Room of One's Own* concentrates on fiction and woman, and as I have previously mentioned in the first section of this paper, Virginia Woolf expresses at the beginning of her work that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (2). Nonetheless a couple of obstacles appear in this affirmation: earning money is an arduous endeavour for them and

³ *Emily Davies and Girton College* (1927) is written by Barbara Lady Stephen to show the pioneering labour of Girton College's co-founder towards women's movement.

in case of accomplishing this objective, law does not allow women to possess money because it is considered their husband's property. Mary Beton illustrates this struggle through her fellow Mary Seton's situation: "It is only for the last forty-eight years that Mrs Seton has had a penny of her own. For all the centuries before that it would have been her husband's property" (26). Subsequently, Mary Beton presents an intriguing reflection:

I pondered why it was that Mrs Seton had no money to leave us; and what effect poverty has on the mind ... and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer. (27-28)

Mrs Seton⁴ had no money to leave because she was deprived of the right of owning properties so, then, poverty may set a notion of incapacity and insufficiency in her mind. These feelings lead to the sensation of being trapped by circumstances. The word-game—*lock out* and *lock in*—that Woolf presents produce a stimulating inquiry. These lines could be interpreted as if "be locked out" supposes that Mrs Seton cannot accede to her husband's property so that she is out of the possibility of individualism because, at the same time, she is "locked in" at home relying on her husband's desires. In this way, the husband possesses money and a wife who becomes insecure and vulnerable. This usual situation belongs to tradition while, as Virginia Woolf observes, a writer's mind does not participate from tradition. Therefore, women are tied to tradition, what makes more difficult for them to be writers. This reflection demonstrates that a yearly allocation will provide them freedom since not economically relying on anyone will let those who desire

⁴ The characters of Mrs Seton and Mrs Beton are created in order to portray a general vision of any woman. An individual figure voices the feelings and status of a group and personifies it.

it to develop a literary career. Continuing with women and her possibilities of being writers, owning an appropriate space is crucial and money is interconnected with it: “But for women ... In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century” (63). Added to this issue, a mistress has to face lack of intimacy: “If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain, — ‘women never have an half hour... that they can call their own’— she was always interrupted” (80). The eighteenth century concludes and the middle-class ladies begin to write, and Mrs Beton corroborates this change by observing that the library’s shelves are occupied by several volumes written by women. In this sense, the female sex is provided with a voice thanks to the contribution of many writers who dared to leave imposition and convention.

3. Judith Shakespeare

Throughout the third chapter, Virginia Woolf goes back to the Elizabethan era (1558-1603) with the intention of illustrating how women lived in England. Mary Beton selects Professor Trevelyan’s *History of England* to recover facts about this period. Searching for the word “Women”, she discovers that wife-beating was men’s right, marriage was not related to personal affection, and the husband was lord and master of his wife by law. Despite these affirmations, women do not appear further on the course of history before the eighteenth century. In times of Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare was a recognised unequalled author. What would happen if William had a potential sister? Woolf audaciously introduces the metaphor of Judith Shakespeare who represents any gifted woman limited by custom. Suppose that, living in the Shakespeare family, Judith

is as qualified as William and they are interested in writing and working in the theatre. While William moves to London to begin his career, the uneducated Judith works at home and is proposed to marriage against her will. Provided that Judith escapes to be an actress and a playwright, Virginia Woolf's conclusive words demonstrate that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (59). Wherefore the archetype of Judith Shakespeare contends the reality of being born female in the precedent period: their inherent state does not tolerate their desire of accomplishing male works and pastimes.

4. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Greta Gerwig's adaptation

The American novel *Little Women* (1868) embodies the subjects addressed in Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*: society, marriage, education, and money; and serves as a study of the female figure in that period. Nowadays most women are still fighting against inequality and repression and this is the reason why Greta Gerwig recovers Alcott's story in a 2019 movie of the same name. Her work presents some minor changes although the implicit idea remains intact. Therefore, the movie reinforces previous reflections of this paper. Revolving around the middle-class family March that enjoys some amenities, *Little Women* deals with issues such as the poor education of women, the difficulty to be designated as "female geniuses" who live in a world lead by men, along with marriage that is presented more as "an economic proposition" and "mercenary" than a "romance". Despite this fact, marriage becomes essential to fit into society as the publisher mentions to Jo while they are discussing about the "spinster" protagonist in her novel. Josephine March, who rejects common female stereotypes and even manifests that she will not get married because she intends to make her own way in

the world, achieves to write professionally and publishes her own novel. Alcott and Woolf similarly use their literary characters to criticise society, aiming to change its mentality: “There are things that are not sayable. That’s why we have art”, declared the English artist Leonora Carrington.

5. Conclusion

The present study begins with an enumeration of cases of inequality around the female figure and finishes appealing to Jo March who attempts to gain her own status as a writer. Intending to understand the current social events we should date back history, and this is the reason why this essay analyses the Elizabethan and the Victorian eras via the point of view of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s*. Intellectual ambition clearly provides emancipation of the strings of tradition; notwithstanding, achieving this ambition is only possible through education that is, at the same time, subjected to money and therefore, to social class prospects. Nevertheless, this essay does not intend to support the fight against men or make a generalisation about all women and men; on the contrary, it has the objective of raising awareness towards the own circumstances of each sex and the need of rejecting odd stereotypes. Inequality and social conventions work together to create detrimental labels which contribute to maintain those ideas of inferiority and superiority that prevent from centring the attention on other more important problems. Here, literature materializes in order to provide voice to facts, feelings and, in line with this paper, to those devoiced women.

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